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Memorandum of Conversation

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DATE: June 28, 1977

SUBJECT: Yrigoyen's Incarceration in Argentina

PARTICIPANTS: Mr. Hipolito Solari Yrigoyen, Senator in Argentina
Ms. Joe Marie Groiesgraber, Wash. Office on Latin America
Ms. Patricia Derian, Coordinator for Human Rights and Humanitarian Affairs
Mr. Mark Schneider, Deputy Coordinator for Human Rights
Mr. Cliff Brody, Human Rights Officer, D/HA (notetaker)

In response to Ms. Derian's question, Mr. Yrigoyen recounted his experiences between August 16, 1976, and May 17, 1977.

His imprisonment began when he was taken to a clandestine military location at Bahia Blanca. For fifteen days, he was in a safe house, hands tied, blindfolded and hooded. Thirty others were there, beaten, given electric shocks, suffocated, and subjected to mock executions. It was torture for pleasure at Bahia Blanca; no interrogations were made. The worst of all treatment was having a .45 caliber pistol in his mouth for three hours, and hearing others being tortured. The triple A and military, one and the same, were behind these activities.

At the end of August, the "transfer" from illegal to legal imprisonment occurred. Taken in a small truck from Bahia, he was suddenly pushed out onto the road during a staged fake terrorist attack. Police arrived immediately, arrested him, and returned him to Bahia. He was still under Army control, but now it was legal. His first arrest, August 16, was a middle-of-the-night raid on his home. Alone there, he had been shot at when the police came in, and taken away clandestinely.

With his legal incarceration came a government decree confirming his detention (Sept. 1). He was taken by train and truck, chained and gagged with 16 others, to Rawson, in every respect a concentration camp. Treatment there was inhumane. Of the 16, two were beaten so mercilessly that they died. One,

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ARGENTINA PROJECT (S200000044)

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Margaret P. Grafeld, Director

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a former deputy--Amaya--had his head split; another, a former municipal council president--Valenberg--was beaten especially severely, he was told, because he was old (60 years) and Jewish.

The Rawson prison population consisted not only of terrorists, but suspected terrorists, families of terrorists, and others simply "suspect." One only saw one's jailor's--no talking was allowed. The climate was cold; bathing water had ice in it. The diet was mainly one kind of small vegetable. Waking hours were continual fits of nervous tension; sleep at night was interrupted four times for head counts. Even when moving from place to place inside the prison, people were chained. Family members nominally could visit, up to five visits an hour long each 45 days. Most families did not have enough money to pay their way to Rawson. Solitary confinement, one of many severe punishments meted out, meant 30 days without clothes. Every three hours, the door would be opened and cold water splashed on the prisoner.

Mr. Yrigoyen was not punished as severely at Rawson as most others there. Of forty or so prisoners in his cellblock, however, thirty-five were treated with the harshest methods. No one resisted, there being no opportunity. The Red Cross came first in January; prisoners to whom they talked were always in the company of a jailor. No matter what the prisoners said to the Red Cross, they were beaten afterwards. There were no regular Red Cross visits after that. One visit occurred in March or April. The food improved two or three days at most after the visits.

Mr. Yrigoyen offered these comments on his personal commitment to democracy in Argentina. All his life he had stated his public opposition to abuses of power. In his view, abuse of power was as reprehensible if the result of government excess as terrorist activity. He was aware that, in today's Argentina, to criticize the junta's abuses meant being labeled a Communist. He accepted the risk, disregarding any public abuse heaped on him, and knowing he could be arrested.

His role as a leading politician in Argentina protected him from the worst sorts of inhumane treatment meted out daily to most of Rawson's inmates. His name was known, nationally and internationally. This was insurance against the torture which killed people daily--allegedly, when the authorities acknowledged them, in battles with terrorists.

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The majority of Argentina's people are democratically oriented. They want neither the extremes of authoritarian military rule nor leftist terrorism. Some say Videla, the junta leader, is not the worst of all leaders; this would be akin to saying there might have been someone worse than Hitler or Mussolini so everyone should be thankful. Videla is one step beyond, and worse, than Chile's Pinochet, who at least openly declares his preference for authoritarian rule. Videla speaks of "democracy," "due process," and human rights, but he is lying when insisting that the situation in Argentina is improving. For any 200 people freed, 500 more are arrested with no charge. If charges are trumped up, what is the power of a prisoner to assert they are false?

Mr. Yrigoyen had these comments on the U.S. role. The United States should not be deceived by an attempt by Videla to create the illusion of an Argentina becoming more and more democratic. Argentina now is like Spain before--"next year things will get better," authorities insisted, but in fact Spain had to await the passing of Franco. The United States should take note of how Mr. Yrigoyen was finally released to measure the effect of international pressure on Argentina to change its policies. Videla was to travel to Caracas on a State visit. The Venezuelan Senate passed a resolution recommending that the visit be cancelled and that Mr. Yrigoyen be released. Venezuela's president, Carlos Andres Perez, telephoned Videla that the visit indeed depended on Mr. Yrigoyen's being liberated. Videla acceded.

As for the Argentine junta bureaucracy, matters cannot be measured so easily. As in Chile, Mr. Yrigoyen feels, the international dialogue placing the junta "in the dock" causes a degree of concern below the top level of leadership. Specific foreign government measures, such as the Perez call or U.S. denial of security assistance may be disregarded publicly by leaders but cause uneasiness within the "system."

The pattern of Mr. Yrigoyen's release from prison dictated prudence in speaking out publicly in exile, at least for the short term. He was taken to the airport in handcuffs and placed on a commercial plane; his wife was there, with a few clothes and \$300. His sons, 17, 19, and 20, were not, and they are still in Argentina. His wife and he will return this week to Venezuela, and she will go on to Buenos Aires to attempt getting the children out. Mr. Yrigoyen will hold off speaking publicly or pressing his case before the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, which has received it, until their divided family is reunited outside Argentina.

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Responding to Ms. Derian's specific inquiry, Mr. Yrigoyen felt that the maximum good of another visit by her to Argentina would result if she could have first hand exposure to the worst camps--Rawson, La Plata, Coronda, Villa Devoto, Mazmorras. Both agreed, however, that the Argentine authorities would not allow this to happen. Nor should the U.S. have confidence that people such as General Vilas, who ran the military district where Mr. Yrigoyen was first arrested and tortured, had the courage to take the sort of action inherent in the argument, offered by Ms. Derian during her first Argentine trip, that the power of the state would be better used, and national interest better served, if the efforts now directed against terrorism instead were targeted on preserving and enhancing due process.

Mr. Yrigoyen thanked the President and Ms. Derian for their efforts on his behalf. This help was crucial, he stated, in assuring his survival in the hands of the junta. He left a letter of thanks for the President (now in translation; to be forwarded to the White House).

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